

*Lifting Life's Possibilities*  
*Media Guide*



# Open your mind.

Stereotypes about persons with mental illness, mental retardation or substance abuse disorders are slowly changing. Language, the living and constantly changing medium by which societies and cultures express their values and attitudes, must keep pace with and reflect these changes. This guide is not designed to force a standard of “political correctness” on media professionals and the public. Rather this guide is a means to supply a language that upholds the dignity of all human beings.



Serving over  
**220,000 Alabamians...**

Words equal power. People may say words will not break bones, but they do break hearts. People with mental disabilities do not want to be defined by their disability but rather their ability. People tend to be more aware of discrimination against race, religion, etc. than the discrimination against mental disabilities.

The media guide is an educational brochure that makes suggestions for appropriate language. The department is asking that we treat people with the dignity and respect we all deserve.

# See my disAbility.



**H**i, My name is Titus. I developed symptoms of a mental illness in my early twenties

*while living and working in New York. I struggled with severe depression and contemplated suicide. I eventually came to Alabama and I was homeless.*

*I decided to receive treatment for one last time. I found out that people really do care and that life is worth living. Now, I work, act and paint. I have also spoken to many groups and was featured on the Alabama Department of Mental Health's public education campaign. I want people to see me, not my disability.*

**M**y name is George and I went to school at Berry High School in Hoover, Ala. The one thing I longed for was to be treated fairly with respect just like anybody else.

*With the support of my grandmother, I learned how to drive and have had my license for 17 years. For the past nine years I have been independent, have a job and live in my own apartment.*



*“Until the great mass of the people shall be filled with the sense of responsibility for each other’s welfare, social justice can never be attained.” - Helen Keller*

## General Information

### Journalism with respect to people with disabilities

- A preferred method to use in referring to specific individuals is to remember that they are **people** first.
- Quite often, various disability terminology are inappropriately used as adjectives to describe nouns. For example, the term schizophrenic is often used to describe viewpoints that change frequently. i.e. “That schizophrenic legislator cannot make up his mind about these issues.”
- Defining an individual by their particular disability or illness is often hurtful. Avoid language such as “Karen is a schizophrenic.” Use “Karen has a mental illness.”
- In writing, make sure when making a reference to a person’s mental illness that the reference is accurate and appropriate. It is always a good idea to get the opinions of experts on mental illness and other health care issues. Also, inviting an individual to share their stories and tell how their illness affects their lives could give insight into their victories.
- Portraying persons with disabilities as overly courageous, brave, extraordinary or superhuman implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to have talents or skills, which is definitely not the case. (So be careful not to over-sensationalize the story.)

# People First Language Is Always Correct.

In People First Language, the person comes before the disability. Labels are only appropriate as a diagnostic term within the healthcare system or in a legal setting. People with disabilities make up the nation's largest minority group. It is the most inclusive and most diverse.

## Reporting Principle.

According to the Associated Press (AP) Style, the description of disabled, handicapped and impaired is as follows:

“In general do not describe an individual as disabled unless it is clearly pertinent to a story. Avoid such euphemisms as mentally challenged and descriptions that connote pity, such as afflicted with or suffers from mental illness. “Rather use, has a mental illness.”

*“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.” - Mark Twain*

## Appropriate Terminology

*Blind/Visually impaired*...a condition in which a person has a loss of vision for ordinary life purposes. *Visually impaired* is a generic term used to refer to all degrees of vision loss.

*Brain Injury*...a condition where there is long-term or temporary disruption in brain function. Difficulties with the cognitive, physical, emotional or social functioning may occur.

*Cleft palate/lip*...a specific congenital disability involving the lip and gum. The term hare lip is not correct and it is stigmatizing.

*Congenital disability*...a disability that has existed since birth. The use of birth defect is incorrect.

*Deaf*...this refers to a profound degree of hearing loss that prevents understanding speech through the ear. Hearing impaired and hearing loss are terms used by some to indicate any degree of hearing loss.

*Developmental disability*...is any mental and/or physical disability starting before the age of 22 and continuing indefinitely. It limits one (or more) major life activity such as self-care, language, learning, mobility, self-direction, independent living and economic self-sufficiency.

*Disability*...a term used to describe a functional limitation that interferes with a person's ability. For example, the ability to walk, lift, hear or learn. Use as a descriptive noun or an adjective.

*Down syndrome*...a chromosome disorder, which usually causes a delay in physical, intellectual and language development. Down syndrome usually results in mental retardation.

*HIV/AIDS*...Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) is an infectious disease resulting in the loss of the body's immune system. The disease is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

*Learning disability*...a permanent condition that affects the way individuals will take in, retain and express information. Some groups prefer specific learning disability, because it emphasizes that only certain learning processes are affected.



# Appropriate Terminology (cont.)

*Mental disability*...The Federal Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) lists four categories under mental disability. The four categories are psychiatric disability, retardation, learning disability or cognitive impairment.

*Mental illness*...is a biological brain disease that causes mild to severe disturbances in thought and/or behavior, which results in the inability to cope with certain demands and routines of life.

*Mental retardation*...refers to persons with substantial intellectual delay who may require environmental or personal supports to live independently. It is a life-long cognitive disability.

*Seizure*...is an involuntary muscular contraction, a brief impairment or loss of consciousness, etc. resulting from a neurological condition such as epilepsy.

*Speech disorder*...is a condition in which a person has limited or difficult speech patterns.

*Stroke*...is caused by an interruption in blood flow to the brain. Stroke survivor is preferred over stroke victim.

*Substance dependence*...refers to patterns of use that result in significant impairment in at least three life areas (family, job, health, etc.) over any 12 month period. *Substance dependence* is generally characterized by impaired control over consumption, preoccupation with the substance and denial of impairment.

# Language Choice

## Use:

Jane is a person with epilepsy.

Jack is a person with mental illness.

Wheelchair user

Individuals with mental retardation

Individual with a mental disorder

Jim is a person with physical disability.

He receives special ed services.

Congenital disability.

## Instead of:

Jane is afflicted with epilepsy.

Jack is crazy.

Bound or confined to a wheelchair

Brad is retarded.

The insane

Jim is a cripple.

He's in special ed.

Birth defect.



**H**i, my name is Keith. My family and I attend meetings and workshops sponsored by the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation's Office of Consumer Empowerment. I am a registered voter, I have a job, and I enjoy managing my own money. I also sit in on classes at Faulkner University.

## Headlines: Appropriate

Mental health needs more attention

This headline was featured in the January 14, 2006 issue of The Birmingham News. This headline is very appropriate. The article addressed the issues associated with the stigma that surrounds mental illness.

Local group fights  
schizophrenia stigma

This headline was featured in the January 3, 2006 issue of the Mobile Register. The headline makes no reference to any one person and appropriately describes the article to follow.

## Headlines: Inappropriate

**Residents reject  
retard housing**

This headline was featured in the April 6, 2006 issue of the Democrat-Reporter in Linden, Ala. As you can see people first language was not used in this headline. Yes, it is talking about housing, but another less insulting way to say the same thing would be “Residents oppose group home in their community.”

**Mentally ill people  
don't need firearms**

This headline was featured in the January 30, 2004 issue of The Decatur Daily. Look at the usage of “Mentally ill people.” The person should come before the illness. Another way to write this headline would be “People with Mental Illnesses don't need firearms.”

# The Law: People with Mental Disabilities Have Rights

- *Wyatt v. Stickney* set minimum standards of care for people with mental disabilities, safeguarded human rights in Alabama psychiatric and mental retardation institutions and mandated the availability of community care.
- In the *Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988*, it is illegal to deny access to housing based on a disability.
- In *Oxford House v. Babylon*, it was established that a group of people with disabilities living together is a “family” for zoning purposes and cannot be excluded from a neighborhood of single-family homes.
- *Olmstead v. L.C.* preserves the right of people with disabilities to receive services in the least restrictive setting consistent with their need.
- Congress mandates preadmission screening for nursing home applicants and an annual review of those residents to assure the appropriate placement of people with mental disabilities.
- *Mills v. Board of Education* established appropriate education through public schools for children with disabilities. The Act is now called the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA).
- *The American with Disabilities Act* prohibits discrimination against people with physical or mental disabilities, in employment, public services and all aspects of public life (1980).
- *Wyatt v. Hardin* establishes procedures to be followed before an institutional resident may be sterilized (1974) and sets standards governing the use of electroshock in Alabama institutions (1975, revised in 1992).

*\*Information is from the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law.*

# Facts

- More than 54 million Americans have a mental disorder in any given year, although fewer than eight million seek treatment (SGRMH, 1999).
- Depression and anxiety disorders each affect 19 million American adults annually (NIMH, 1999).
- Approximately 12 million women in the United States experience depression every year, that is roughly twice the rate of men (NIMH, 1999).
- One percent of the population (more than 2.5 million Americans) has schizophrenia (Schizophrenia Bulletin, 1998).
- Bipolar disorder, formerly known as manic depressive illness, affects more than two million Americans (NIMH, 2000).
- Approximately 15 percent of all adults who have a mental illness in any given year also experience a co-occurring substance abuse disorder (SGRMH, 1999).
- According to a one year analysis by SANE Australia, of the television drama programs (soap operas, plays and films, etc.) in the United States, 73 percent of people with a mental illness were depicted as violent.
- National surveys have shown that people with mental illness are less likely to commit acts of violence than the average U.S. citizen. They are, however, more than twice as likely to be victims of violence than the average citizen.
- Three out of every 100 people in the country have mental retardation (The Arc, 2001).

# Help us fight the stigma

## Additional Information & Resources

Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation  
<http://www.mh.alabama.gov>  
24-hour Referral Service Line: 1-800-367-0955  
Office of Public Information: 334-242-3417

American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities  
<http://www.aamr.org/>

Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General  
<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth/home.html>

Mental Health America (formerly known as the National Mental Health Association)  
<http://www.nmha.org>  
1-800-969-6642

NAMI, National Alliance on Mental Illness  
<http://www.nami.org>  
1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

National Council on Disability  
<http://www.ncd.gov>  
202-272-2004

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)  
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>  
1-866-615-6464

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)  
<http://www.samhsa.gov>  
240-276-2130

The Arc of the United States  
<http://www.thearc.org>

The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health  
<http://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov/>



*The Brady's both have a mental illness. Mr. Brady has had his own business for many years. They are both a shining example to the fact that most people with mental illness experience recovery with appropriate treatment and can live productive lives.*

*“The last great stigma of the twentieth century is the stigma of mental illness.”*  
- Tipper Gore





Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation  
Office of Public Information  
and Community Relations  
100 N. Union Street, Suite 518  
P.O. Box 361410  
Montgomery, AL 36130-1410  
334-242-3417  
[www.mh.alabama.gov](http://www.mh.alabama.gov)